

Coming for to Carry Me Home: Race in America From Abolitionism to Jim Crow

Randall M. Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Randall M. (2012) "Coming for to Carry Me Home: Race in America From Abolitionism to Jim Crow," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.2.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss2/7>

Review

Miller, Randall M.

Spring 2012

Martinez, J. Michael *Coming For to Carry Me Home: Race in America from Abolitionism to Jim Crow*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., \$45.00 ISBN 978-1-4422-1498-9

Republicans, Race, and Reconstruction

In *Coming for to Carry Me Home*, J. Michael Martinez, author of *Life and Death in Civil War Prisons* and *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan*, argues that "the story of [Abraham] Lincoln and the Radical Republicans could be understood and appreciated only in the broader context of nineteenth-century race relations" (xi). To that end, Martinez adopted a wide-lens perspective to explore Republicans' understanding of racial imperatives and politics and the interests pressing for the abolition of slavery and the inclusion (or exclusion) of blacks into the American polity. He tracks the issue(s) of race from the rise of organized abolitionism in the 1830s to the demise of Reconstruction in the 1870s. In doing so, he sees Lincoln's and the Radical Republicans' ideas about race and slavery as central to the ways abolitionism gave way to the abandonment of blacks and the acceptance of racial segregation by the end of the century.

Martinez largely focuses on events and interests in Washington in assaying the dynamics and direction of antislavery interests, Civil War and Reconstruction policies, and postwar practices regarding the status of blacks in polity and society. His account follows the latest literature with its appreciation for the vagaries of personality and circumstance affecting ideas and policy at the national level. He also uses the tried-and-true technique of letting the biographies of select prominent individuals, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner, and Benjamin Wade, to name several, represent the larger interests. In his casting of critical actors, he especially gives Ulysses S. Grant his due as a defender of liberty. He also ably relates the legislative doings and executive actions that led to emancipation and then promised Reconstruction. All this is to

good effect.

But Martinez does not succeed in making the case for race as the pivotal factor in shaping emancipation policy and Reconstruction promise. The centrality of race is implicit throughout his book—and what historian would deny such, anyway—but not examined explicitly as a construct and a concern during the period. He hardly discusses the ways race was understood in mid-nineteenth-century America, especially the growing and contested ideas about origins, innate or learned qualities, and the place of race in America. Race was ever present as a defining category and even concern, but it was also a malleable and contingent term. And it was not necessarily a determinative one in regards to political, military, economic, and social interests. Questions of class, community, and property intruded into Reconstruction policy as much as race did, and all interacted so that pulling out one factor, however potent, as the causal agent for people's actions distorts the tangled history of emancipation and Reconstruction. It also discounts the role of blacks in defining themselves during this period. Indeed, except for Frederick Douglass, blacks appear almost wholly as objects or victims in Martinez's rendering, as if their actions did not count for much in forcing emancipation and defining what freedom meant.

Martinez's approach misses much of the dynamics of Reconstruction as it played out "on the ground." He has little to say about efforts to "reconstruct" the South in practice with such federal agencies as the Freedmen's Bureau or non-governmental organizations such as the American Missionary Association, most of which were intended to lay the foundations for a free people rather than provide any longterm care for them. Few Republicans endorsed the Radicals' insistence that the federal government needed to be the "custodian of liberty" and assume a prolonged policy of occupation. For all the emphasis in the literature about the emergence of the central state due to the war, federal efforts and resources remained largely decentralized and dependent on local support. Federal capacity never matched Radical Republican ambitions. The limited reach of federal power gave local interests a major say in deciding what Reconstruction actually meant in fact.

Martinez's largely top-down perspective obscures the variety of responses to emancipation and Reconstruction that derived from local identity, changes in local economy, local class relations, and local "memory" and meanings of the war. Such neglect is all the more remarkable because in his most original chapter, on York County, South Carolina, Martinez demonstrates how important

locality was in implementing Reconstruction, or resisting it as the unreconstructed white southerners there did with intimidation and violence. More such case studies of the process would show what "race" meant in the larger history of Reconstruction as it was worked out during the 1860s and after.

In sum, Martinez's book does not fully realize its title, though it does point in a useful direction. Withal, it provides a very good survey of the politics and political leaders of/in the Republican party and the limits of Reconstruction policy in building a "new" South based on a respect for the "freedom" of the former enslaved people and a repudiation of the ideas and interests that led to secession. It also is a reminder that, as Eric Foner wrote over twenty years ago, Reconstruction was and is America's "unfinished revolution." In his assessment of the age, Martinez indicts the Civil War-era Republican generation for not fulfilling its supposed promise of securing equality for all. That charge should cause readers to consider what any generation, even our own, could and should do to bring home that promise and finish the work emancipation demanded.

Randall M. Miller is Professor of History at Saint Joseph's University. His most recent book, Lincoln & Leadership, is forthcoming from Fordham University Press in summer 2012.